

Joliet Junior College

Oral History Program

Leslie M. Ross

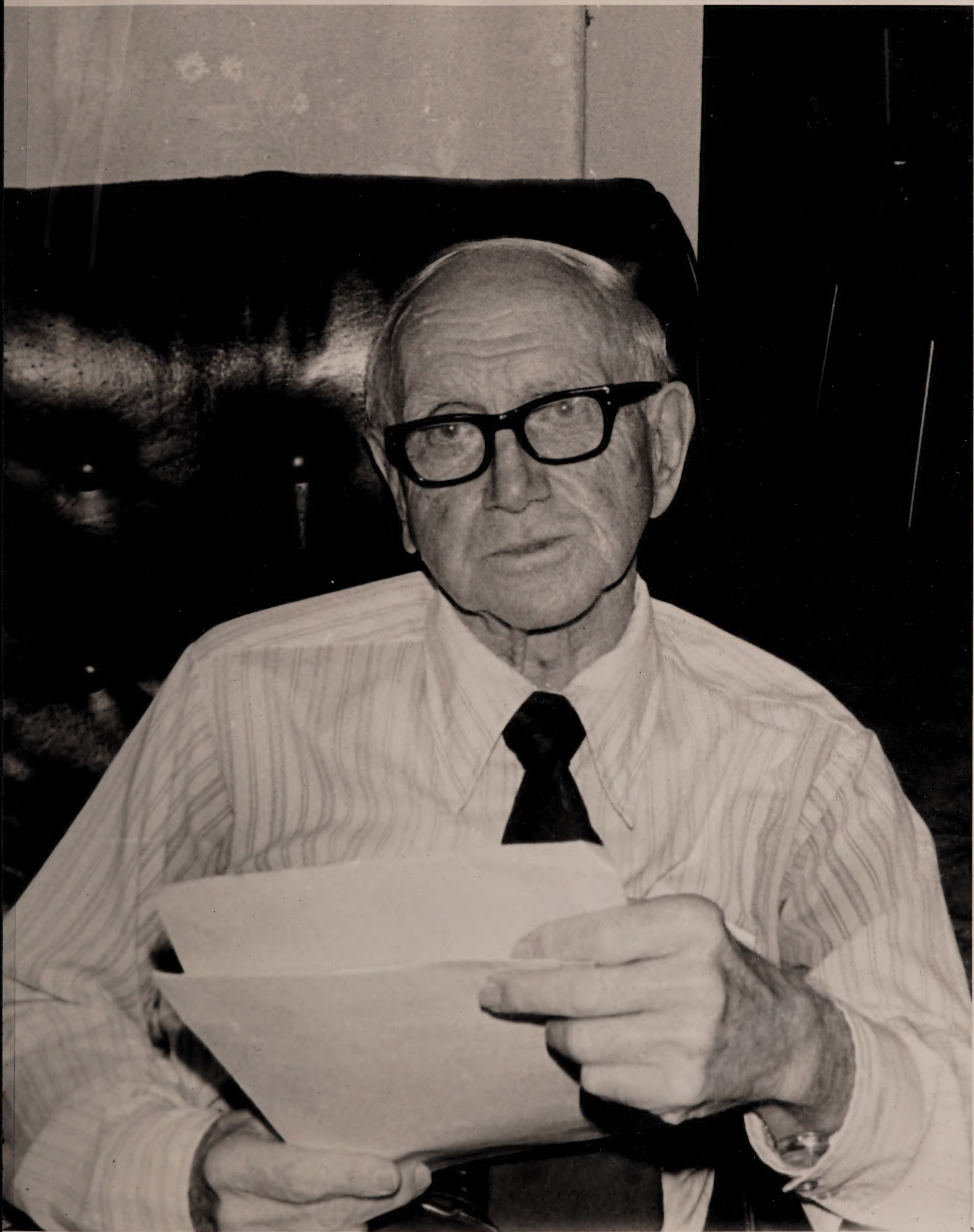
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JOLIET JUNIOR COLLEGE

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

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Jeff Miller  
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Oct 16, 1975  
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Oct 16, 1975  
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INTERVIEWEE: Leslie M. Ross

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Journal College Oral History Project by Jeff Miller at Mr. Ross's home in

Coal City, Illinois, on October 16, 1975, at about 7:30 a.m.

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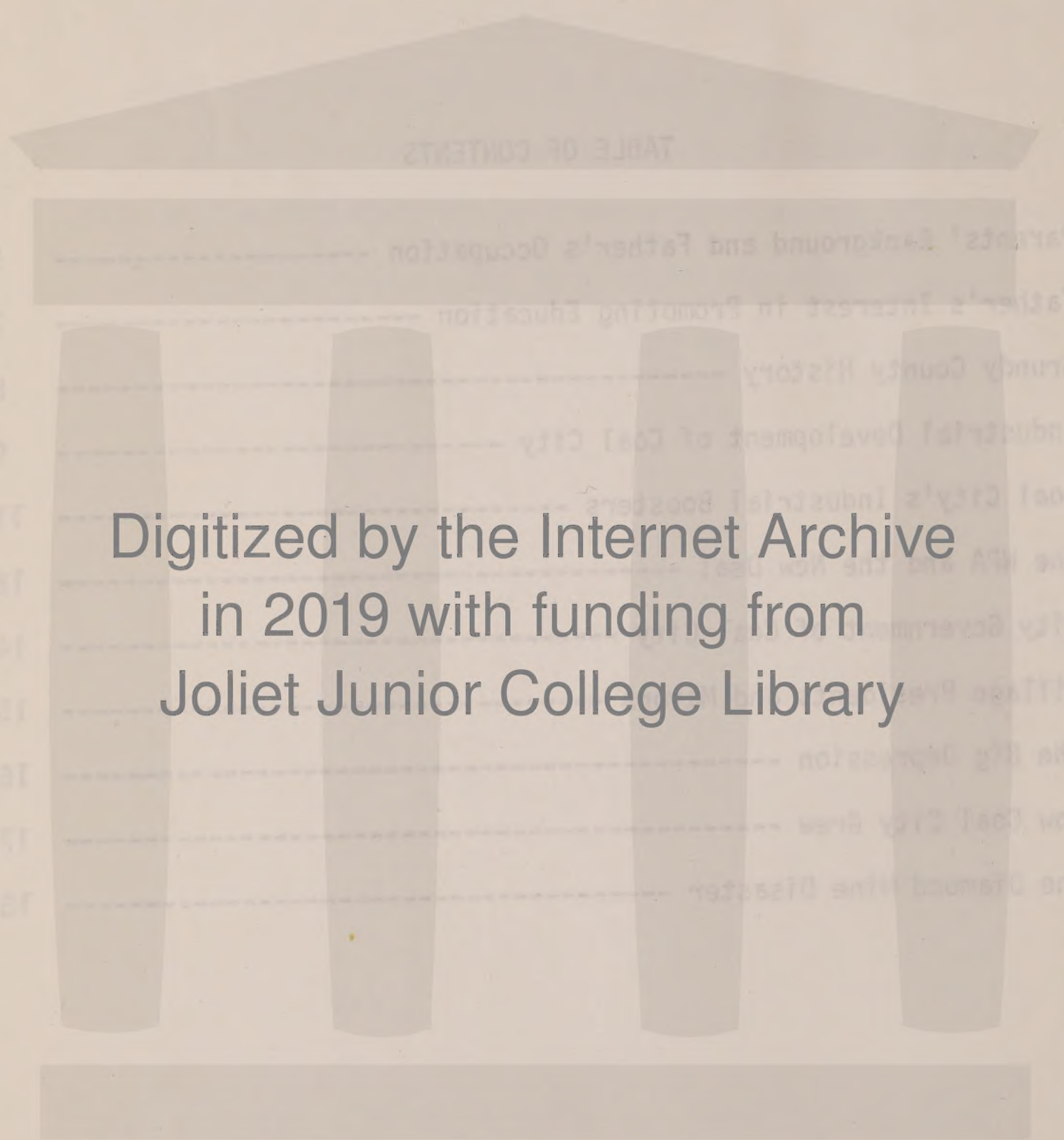
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Scottish people had moved there.

MILLER: You said they didn't start housekeeping?

ROSS: They didn't start housekeeping in Scotland. They married and came directly to this country. See, no home over there was established in Scotland, and they came to Coal City because other Scottish people had come here and because this was a coal-mining area, and that was my father's occupation. Well, he stayed with it until, oh, for several





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INTERVIEWER: Jeff Miller

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INTERVIEWER: This is an interview with Leslie Ross for the Joliet Junior College Oral History Project by Jeff Miller at Mr. Ross's home in Coal City, Illinois, on October 16, 1975, at about 7:30 p.m.

MILLER: Mr. Ross, could we start out with you giving us a little background on yourself?

ROSS: OK. Well, I'm certainly very glad to have you here tonight, and I hope I can give you at least some information both on the Village of Coal City and the County of Grundy in which, as you know, Coal City is located. I suppose probably you want first my credentials, if you want to call them that. I am the son of a coal miner, James Ross. (Hi, there.) There's another James Ross, only he's my son. This is Jeff Miller. As I say, my father was a miner in the deep coal mines. He had started in that occupation when he was just a boy in Scotland. And after he and my mother were married, they came directly -- they didn't even start housekeeping in Scotland -- they came directly to this area because other Scottish people had preceded them here.

MILLER: You said that they didn't start housekeeping?

ROSS: They didn't start housekeeping in Scotland. They married and came directly to this country. See, no home over there was established in Scotland, and they came to Coal City because other Scottish people had come here and because this was a coal-mining area, and that was my father's occupation. Well, he stayed with it until, oh, for several







years. See, Coal City had two coal companies that operated this territory, the Wilmington Star Mining Company and the Big Four Company. The Wilmington Star had mines right in the area of Coal City and they would number them -- Number 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 -- and so on. The first shaft that my father worked in was Number 5 which was right down here at the southwest end of town. And then as that played out, they went to Number 6 and then Number 7. Number 7 was the last one of the deep mines around here. And he, as I say, he contracted the occupational disease of miner's asthma.

MILLER: About what time, date was this?

ROSS: When he was, oh, in his late forties or early fifties.

MILLER: Was this like in the 1890's? Do you remember offhand?

ROSS: Well, let me see.

MILLER: You said he had just come over from Scotland.

ROSS: He was married when he was about 25 years old. And he came directly here, as I have said. And he died in 1914 at the age of 56, so you figure it out for yourself.

MILLER: OK.

ROSS: And as I say, the reason for his coming here was that this was a coal-mining area. And when he no longer could endure the conditions of deep mining, he became a salesman for the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company. And he was in that capacity that he was working when we were young kids. Incidentally, even though he was, had gone to school 'til he was only twelve years old or so, he did, he was well-, self-educated.







He could write a good hand, and he was good at figures. And in almost every organization that he was a part of, whether it was the Presbyterian Church, or the Scottish people had what they called the Order of Scottish Clans here, well, he was the financial secretary for it. And also he was one of the chief promoters of the -- you see, Coal City originally had only ten grades of elementary school. There was no high school, and my father was one of the ones who promoted the high school. He tramped many a mile getting signatures on the petition that brought the high school proposition to a vote. So I think that if -- in fact, when the high school was dedicated, the County Superintendent, Mr. -- of Grundy County, gave my father a great deal of credit for the work that he had done in organizing this high school here in Coal City. And, of course, we are very proud of that. And then he was not only sold on the idea of education for the kids in general, but at that time my older brother who had started working in the local drugstore here was sent on to school, the University of Illinois School of Pharmacy in Chicago, and, as I say, I went first to the -- when I left home for school -- I went to the University of Chicago for a couple of years and then on up to Northwestern when they established the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University. And I graduated from there in 1923. So I think that is a fairly good record for a man that had started work just as a laborer in a coal mine, for my father to promote education for the community in general and for his family in particular. Some information on Grundy County History I can give you a few of the highlights at least. I understand from a book by Harry Huff -- he was a man from Mazon who's -- in these later years at least -- was quite active in the writing of the history







of this area, particularly Grundy County. And he tells us that the General Assembly was created Grundy County on February 17, 1841. It was an area of land taken from LaSalle County. LaSalle County was a large county. When they wanted to form Grundy County, they simply took a hunk out of LaSalle.

MILLER: That is a neighboring county now?

ROSS: Grundy County. And at that time there was no, of course, the main city of Grundy County was the city of Morris which wasn't very big at that time. I don't know just how big it was -- but it was the one that was the natural point for the county seat. But you had a river between the south end of the county and the north; in fact, you had a river in the canal, the Illinois and Michigan Canal and the Illinois River, of course, and you had no bridge to get across it. So when the people from the southern end of the county wanted to go to Morris, they had to ferry across. So one of the first projects they had -- after many years of crossing the Illinois River by ferry -- work was started on a bridge in October -- now get this date -- work was started on October, 1855 and that bridge was completed March, 1856. Another important factor in the development of Mazon as the county seat was the coming of the Rock Island Railroad which was in 1851. It resulted in the first move of business of the city of Morris north from the canal to practically where it is now. I was going to mention one reason that Coal City didn't go the way of most small mining communities in this general area. When a mine was sunk, a little community would go up around it, quite naturally the workers and their families; and then, when that mine was worked out, they would simply disappear, and the people would move on someplace else.







But Coal City had disadvantages that before all the deep mines were exhausted we had what you might call an industrial development and a pretty well-diversified one at that. One of the first, Sears, Roebuck and Company started a clothing factory here. And another industry was the Clay Products Company. You could expect that because . . .

MILLER: The clay was mined also from . . .

ROSS: Well, clay wasn't deliberately mined; it had to be contended with. The coal was mixed with clay, so when the coal came out, it had clay in it; it had to be separated. So this Hager Brick and Tile Company started out here west of town around shaft Number 6. And, as I say, that was the start of the clay products industry in this town which later developed to a much greater degree, the Illinois Clay Products which now has a Goose Lake plant. It started really on the basis of this original Hager Brick and Tile Company.

MILLER: So they are still mining clay today, or using clay products?

ROSS: Out in the Goose Lake area, yes, they are. And. . .

MILLER: You said that Coal City was unlike a lot of other coal-towns, or coal-mining towns, because they -- stayed on?

ROSS: Because they had a chance at diversified industry.

MILLER: Why was this possible for them and not for the others?

ROSS: Well, because they had some good promoters here. The Macomber and White Wire Rope Mill. The superintendent of it was a man by the name of William Summerville. And he also was the mayor of Coal City.







So he was one of the first to start the industrial growth of this town. And, as I say, that was soon followed by the Sears-Roebuck Clothing Factory, and the Atlas Wallpaper Mill came along in after years (I haven't the exact chronological record of the start of these companies), but those were the main ones. And even when the Macomber and White Company moved to Kenosha back in 1905, their building was then taken over; you see, that left a big factory building, and that was when Sears-Roebuck come in with their clothing factory. So it was a happy circumstance, if you want to call it that.

MILLER: That left jobs for the coal miners that were unemployed at the time?

ROSS: That left jobs, and they weren't absolutely tied to the deep coal mining industry. Of course, in later years the strip mining operation came along and saved the whole day as far as miners were concerned because it was another type of mining entirely; they simply opened up the big pits and it was an open type of strip mining.

MILLER: Didn't the coal mining industry kind of, didn't it kind of stop after a while?

ROSS: Well, it -- as a peak mining industry -- it stopped after a while. After they had the strip mining, of course, it was given a new lease on life. And it's still operating.

MILLER: That is because it was dug out in a different way?

ROSS: That was because the coal was only -- in the first place it was because they had different types of equipment. The steam shovels which







they didn't have in the old days and they couldn't have gone down -- these coal mines were anywhere from 90 to 125 feet deep. They couldn't possibly open that up. But this shallower vein which could be operated by big shovels was the lifesaver as far as the actual coal mining was concerned. But you see there's two veins. There's this deep line and then there's this shallower line that lent itself to the strip mining. And that was what saved the coal mining industry, but, I should point out that not only that but getting industry at the instigation of men like Summerville. In fact, I've got quite a few men's names here that I'd like to mention that I think had an important part in the development of Coal City as an industrial center. You can shut it off now.

MILLER: That is all right. Go ahead.

ROSS: So the various organizations that had a very real part in developing Coal City were the Coal City Commercial Club. They helped attract the industry that we have been talking about; and the Coal City Civic Club came along later, and it worked along the same line, trying to, and not only trying, but actually attracting new industry here.

MILLER: How did they go about doing that? Was it an organization just for families?

ROSS: No, it was the sending out of printed literature to prospective lists and so forth, and that was the way they operated at the start. And then among the most recent organizations to promote Coal City development was the Coal City Lions Club. And their particular project was the erection of the street signs, you know, the name; we didn't have that before -- and also the development of the City Park over here. But, as





I say, there were some men that I think deserve a bit of special credit for the change of Coal City from a purely mining town to a diversified, industrial town. When I think of those, certainly the name of Thomas Berta -- he is presently proprietor of the Berta Lumber Company -- my brother John Ross, now dead, but he was certainly a part of that development -- and later was one of the partners in the Broadway Garage. And I think maybe I could take a bit of credit on my own there. I think that I helped as much as I could both in the publication and in other ways in this general development. And I also helped in this respect: that for a time in the thirties, I guess it would have been, I was the, in charge of the County Relief Station. And we initiated work projects which in Coal City, you know, there was a lot of criticism -- the WPA and all that business.

MILLER: Was this under the New Deal program?

ROSS: Part of the New Deal program. But as I say, there were a lot of boondoggling projects, but I think that we kept our local project from being that. In other words, we put some insight. It used to be that the only paved streets in town were the main streets, Division Street and Broadway. Well, we came along and under the WPA Program we put cement sidewalks in every street in town.

MILLER: What does the WPA stand for?

ROSS: Work Progress Administration.

MILLER: And that was under the New Deal?

ROSS: That was under the New Deal. I was in charge of that both that the





county level and I helped -- I was particularly interested in Coal City projects, naturally, being from Coal City. When I worked, of course, I went back and forth from here.

MILLER: We can keep going. It is all right if there is a pause on the tape.

ROSS: And the, another project that both the Civic Club, or that the Civic Club had a leading part in, and Mr. Berta has enacted -- I was Secretary of the Civic Club in the period at least in which he was President, and it was under that setup that we first got our ornamental street lights, which is a community asset, or we consider it such.

MILLER: You said there were a lot of people who knocked the New Deal program. In town, or ....?

ROSS: No, the New Deal programs in general were severely criticized in a lot of communities because they were boondoggling projects. They got a lot of men out on shovels and leaning on shovels.

MILLER: Just raking leaves?

ROSS: Raking leaves: No, that is not my point. The story that I am trying to get across here is that we had enough men with a vision of what could be done with all that labor. Now the permanent nature in that is the reason that we got these cement sidewalks and other improvements in town. We here in town initiated and operated a kindergarten when there wasn't any kindergarten as part of the public school system. So I think they deserve some credit for that. And the Junior Women's Club -- they worked on the establishment as well as the actual operation





of the new library. So I think those organizations should be given credit for that. Another thing that might be of interest is the form of government in Coal City. It used to be what they. . . a president and a board of trustees, but then it went to a commission form of government which means it had a mayor and four commissioners. The first commissioner under that form of government was this man here, Frank Albright; there is his picture. He was the first mayor under the commission form of government. And I think that is worthy of noting.

MILLER: Was he a very good mayor at the time?

ROSS: Yes, he was. Of course, when we talk about it, these aren't full-time jobs, of course. In fact, most of the time . . .

MILLER: The mayor was only a part-time job?

ROSS: You have the mayor of a city boy in mind. The small town mayor and commissioners couldn't possibly have been full time; there was no way of financing it! So they might have got a dollar or two a meeting, or something like that if they met. But the idea of a full-time, full-paid mayor or city board is simply out of the question, and still is, in the average small town.

MILLER: Would that make somebody really want to look for another job -- if the guy was only getting paid a dollar?

ROSS: If they were interested in the payment of it, if they were interested in public service, public jobs as a paying proposition, they would never in God's world run for mayor or president. Don't you see, this man was a butcher. My brother was a garage man. Tom Berta is a lumber man.





The city, the public service part of it, is simply incidental as far as money is concerned. You do it because you have community spirit and you want to see the community develop. You don't do it because you can tap the public till. Are we on? I think these village presidents or mayors should be mentioned. There was William Summerville; there was Edward Gerard; there was Frank Albright; there was Joe Phillips, who was, I believe Joe still is, mayor. James Krees was mayor at one time; John Kerner was; and LeRoy Brown. That is all I can think of offhand.

MILLER: Was there any. . .

ROSS: Excuse me just a minute. One job that was, or developed into, a full-time job was the village clerk because he had the full-time job of, oh, collecting water rent and fixing water line leaks as they developed and all that kind of stuff. So the clerk was a full-time job, and the man who had that, for the most number of years, was Ernest J. Ferrad, Joe Ferrad; and he did a mighty good job of it. He was also the policeman. They called him the village clerk with police power, I believe. And of course, city jail which didn't amount to much, but it was in the back end of city hall. And in those days there were quite a few knights of the road, or bums, if you want to call them that, that would stop in the community and go around and beg for food. Is that familiar to you? Do you have any of that in Joliet:

MILLER: Sure. We have a lot of that.

ROSS: Well, anyway, they did that, but when nighttime came, the city wasn't about to have them still wandering around, so the village clerk





in this instance that I knew particularly well was Ferrad, he would lock them up in the jail. They would expect that and then in the morning he would let them out. So that was part of his job as police power.

MILLER: Did Coal City come across any hard times? I mean after the industry started up and you had finished the coal mining?

ROSS: They had their share of people on relief. But it was still a much smaller percentage than the national average. Every community in the big depression had hard times. And Coal City was certainly no exception. But the percentage of the Coal City population that was ever on formal relief was much smaller than the national average. I think that's a true statement. I am positive.

MILLER: Did you have any trouble with the government right after it started? You said with your mayors and your commissioners that ran the offices?

ROSS: No, we didn't have any trouble. Oh, every mayor or every president of the village, he wouldn't have won a popularity contest. There was differences of opinion, of course, but as far as any, there was no public scandal, if you want to call it that, that I ever remember from the time of our first mayor in Coal City (was a man by the name of James Short, I believe) and our present mayor (I say is Phillips). And as far as I know there was never any scandals -- yes James Short was the first mayor. The village was incorporated, I don't know if we had that or not. The village was incorporated in 1881. And the first mayor was James Short. And the first mayor under the commission form of government as I have told you here now was Frank Albright. I'm going to read





a page or two from The Coal City Pageant. And I don't feel the least bit guilty about reading it -- I certainly am not guilty of plagiarism because I happen to be the one who wrote it. So, if you will bear with me for just a couple of minutes, here it is: This is the story of Coal City and how it grew-- for it has grown in its 60-odd years (you can see from that that this is written some time back) from a bleak, ugly, mining camp to a well-balanced, progressive city. If not yet beautiful, it is on its way. It has grown, too, in the affections of its people to whom it will always be home, either be it here or away. It is inevitable that Coal City should have grown robust. It has drawn its strength from the earth itself where thousands of years ago nature stored the treasure that was to give this community its name and its purpose. Its peopling, too, seemed designed by circumstance to beget strength and color and vitality. The tradition of the older American stock is rooted in agriculture and commerce. When the time came to extend railroads, build new cities, and labor in the mines, the call for workers went to other lands. The people there responded. To them, it was the call of opportunity, the opening of a door to economic and political liberty. Gladly they exchanged the cramped, tradition-bound quarters of their native land for the bigness and freedom of America. And Coal City was the gainer thereby. Those adventurers to a new world brought not only the willing strength of their bodies, but also their idealism, great ambition for themselves and their children, and a hearty, sometimes a too hearty, zest for life. They came with a song in their hearts, bringing much of the color and flavor of their homelands. Each group arrived in its own due time, the English, Scotch, Irish, Welsh, Italian, Germans, French, Bohemians, leaving behind old loyalties, but





bringing priceless contributions to that great melting pot we call the United States and to that small part of it that was to become known as Coal City. In its history Coal City was struck by tragedy, the threat of which hangs forever over deep coal mining like a dark cloud; the Wilmington Mining and Manufacturing Company's Diamond Number 2, under the supervision of David Mackey and David Skinner, was the doomed mine. It drew its employees from the village of Diamond and from the newly-settled village of Coal City where Montgomery Sharp was president, having succeeded James Short, the first to hold that office. The January thaw of 1883, accompanied by a dreary succession of all-day rains, flooded the level prairie around Diamond to a depth of almost four feet. The terrific ground strain reached the breaking point on the morning of Friday, February 16. Water swirled down a gap ninety feet long and forty feet wide to the abandoned workings which lay east of the main shaft. Three hundred workers, many of them mere boys, labored in the entries to the west. Thus, the keg was between the oncoming flood and the miners. But it was an uneven race that was to ensue. The men had no inkling of its start until the water had begun to rise in the mine shaft. By the time the alarm had spread, all chance of escape by the cage had been cut off. Yet, many died in their panic-stricken attempt to emerge by the way they had entered. The more experienced men quickly realized that there was only -- that their only hope was the ladder in the air shaft that lay 150 feet west of the cave. It was around the mouth of this shaft that a throng of terrified men, women and children quickly gathered. The only help anyone could give was to lend a hand to the half-drowned men as they made their way to the top of the shaft. One woman saw her husband mounting the ladder with the body of their son on





his shoulder. She tried desperately to help him, but before he could reach her outstretched hand, the exhausted man fell back and was lost. Another, having made his way to safety, learned that his young son had not come up, went back and died in an attempt to save the boy. A woman was removed from the scene by friends, her mind shattered by the loss of her husband and three sons. The flood had been discovered at 11:00 a.m. By midafternoon the water had risen to within ten feet of the top of the ninety-foot shaft. By evening the remotest hope of rescue had vanished. The train from Chicago on which H. G. Fordise, general manager of the coal company, would bring special pumps was delayed by floods along the Alton Railway and didn't arrive until eight o'clock. It was met by 150 men who transferred the pumps to handcars and took them to the mine. The effort was in vain. Equally futile were the first attempts to dam the source of the flood. Days passed before the work of recovering the bodies could even be started. It was a grim task, destined never to be completed. The final reckoning is written in bronze at the foot of the monument which now marks the scene of the tragedy. It is seventy-four known victims, twenty-eight bodies recovered. And that monument is right out at the edge of town here. You have probably seen it.

MILLER: It's on Route 31?

ROSS: Yes.

MILLER: That's right by. . .

ROSS: Right at the edge of town. If you go out Division Street, right at the edge of town there, it's right near a trailer camp now, I





think. There is a trailer camp in there. Anyway, that's . . .

MILLER: That's a sad story.

ROSS: So I thought that was the best way of getting that over. I am sorry if I am taking up too much time here.

MILLER: Oh, no. I would like to thank you for letting me have this interview with you. It has been very helpful.





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